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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [XF](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: CODEL LEVIN MEETS WITH DPM SALEH

Classified By: EMIN Charles P. Ries, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (S) In a cordial meeting on March 16, Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh told Senator Carl Levin that recent political developments were proof that the Iraqi political system was working. He expressed confidence that provincial elections would take place in October. Saleh acknowledged there were sectarian problems within the Maliki-led government, but argued the fundamental issue transcended the office of prime minister. On Iran, Saleh said its influence in was Iraq "excessive" and called for a US-led "regional architecture" to contain it. While denying he had intelligence on the matter, Saleh shared his personal belief that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons. Senator Levin said more Iraqi oil revenue should fund reconstruction efforts, and Saleh agreed that Iraq should share more of the responsibility through a fund matching program. Senator Levin also raised his concern over the safety of Assyrian-Chaldean Christian groups in northern Iraq; Saleh promised to take all necessary actions to protect these communities. End Summary.

2. (U) The 45 minute meeting between Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Barham Saleh and Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, took place at the DPM's residence on March 16. Senator Levin was accompanied by Rick Debobes, Majority Staff Director for the Senate Armed Services Committee, William Monahan, Majority Counsel for the Senate Armed Services Committee, as well as the Embassy's Deputy Legislative Affairs Advisor and econoff (notetaker).

POLITICAL PROGRESS AND PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

3. (C) DPM Saleh told Senator Levin that recent political developments were proof that the Iraqi political system was working, and expressed confidence that provincial elections would take place in October. Saleh said the February 13 trifecta of benchmark legislation was further proof; each of the three laws benefited Kurd, Sunni, and Shia, respectively. Asked by Senator Levin about Vice President Abdel Medhi's veto of the Provincial Powers law, Saleh conceded it was a setback but remained hopeful that Abdel Mehdi would reconsider. Saleh stated he knew of the veto before the COR passed the bill and said MPs had "taken for granted" the Presidency Council's support for the law. To Senator Levin's question whether the veto would delay provincial elections in October, Saleh replied, "I am as confident as one can be in Iraq that elections will take place." The DPM said Abdel Medhi still supported the October elections, adding that many

citizens were eager to hold local and national representatives accountable. Saleh also predicted that a larger proportion of Sunni would participate in the provincial elections than Shia. On political reconciliation, Saleh complained that Tawafuq cabinet ministers continued to boycott the government and suggested that the GOI reduce the size of the cabinet from 36 to about 23.

SALEH ON SECTARIANISM IN MALIKI GOVERNMENT

¶4. (S) Senator Levin inquired whether Prime Minister Maliki was beholden to sectarian influences. Prefacing his answer with "Remember, he's my boss," Saleh acknowledged there were sectarian problems within the Maliki-led government, but argued the fundamental issue transcended the office of prime minister. Saleh said Maliki was constrained by political "shackles" and explained that if Sunni groups viewed the government as sectarian, this was indication enough that the administration was not sufficiently reaching out to them.

IRAN

¶5. (S/NF) Saleh said Iranian influence in Iraq was "excessive" and called for more involvement from Arab countries to contain it. Lamenting a lack of Arab diplomatic presence here and arguing the United States alone could not counter nefarious Iranian influence, Saleh called for a "regional architecture with the US as a key pillar." Iran should be a part of that architecture, Saleh said, but on USG terms. Saleh also stated the USG should have more direct engagement with Iran. When Senator Levin pointed out that many in the US did not appreciate the GOI having hosted Iranian President Ahmadinejad, Saleh replied, "The United States may someday leave Iraq. But Iranians will always be next door to us, so we have to deal with them."

¶6. (S/NF) Responding to a question on a possible Iranian nuclear weapon program, Saleh said he thought Iran was indeed pursuing such a capability. Saleh denied having specific intelligence on nuclear weapons, but cited Iran's "self-importance" and "expansionist" foreign policy in supporting his personal belief, "There is no way Iran isn't seeking nukes." He said Iran was threatened by a nuclear-armed Israel and India, but recalled that senior Iranian officials had specifically expressed concern to him over the threat of a "Sunni Pakistan with nukes."

WHO SHOULD PAY FOR RECONSTRUCTION?

¶7. (C) Senator Levin said more Iraqi oil revenue should fund reconstruction efforts, and Saleh agreed that Iraq should share more of the responsibility. Stating, "You have a surplus, we have a deficit," Senator Levin questioned why the US was shouldering the burden of reconstruction efforts. Saleh agreed, and called for a "partnership" in reconstruction, whereby the GOI would match USG funds in such projects. Praising USG assistance in budget execution, Saleh pointed out that the GOI had successfully spent 63 percent of its investment budget in 2007, up from 24 percent in 2006. Saleh stated he would be presenting a plan for the injection of 5 billion USD, carried over from the 2007 budget, to be used for "major" public works, such as schools and hospitals.

BISHOP'S MURDER RAISES CONCERNS

¶8. (U) Senator Levin raised his concern over the safety of Assyrian-Chaldean Christian groups in northern Iraq, and Saleh promised to take all necessary actions to protect these communities. Senator Levin said the recent killing of Bishop Faraj Rahho in Mosul highlighted security concerns facing Iraqi Christians. What they need more than anything is to be able to defend themselves, Senator Levin said. Saleh discouraged the Christian groups from forming Sunni-like self defense groups, stating this would make them more of a target

of violence. He promised Senator Levin that he would raise the issue with Iraqi security forces.

IRAQI VIEW ON US ELECTIONS?

¶9. (C) In response to Senator Levin's question about how Iraqis viewed American presidential elections, Saleh responded, "Do you want to hear the truth...or its cousin?," then answered that the political elite preferred Senator John McCain. Saleh went on to state the Iraqi public was "intrigued" by Senator Barack Obama, but added that Senator McCain's "steady record on Iraq" was "appealing." He also said AQI and Iran were closely watching the U.S. election, and expressed his hope that it would not cause instability in Iraq.

¶10. (U) Senator Levin has not cleared this message.
CROCKER